

# OPINION

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## Dream Big Presidential contest shows progress being made

BY BENTLEY DE BARDELABEN

As a boy, I could be whatever I imagined for myself when I grew up. I could even be the President of the USA.

I grew up in the 1960s, the firstborn son of a retail salesman in Michigan in a modest home that my parents owned. Within that dwelling also lived my two siblings. My mom's primary responsibility was caring for her family. Life as I understood it was "normal."

I disliked that my older sister regularly bossed me about and I often picked on my younger brother who frequently shadowed me. I went to the local public school, played baseball with my friends and rode my bicycle without a care. All in all, I thought of myself as an "all American boy."

Looking back, I realize that although I have heartwarming memories, my upbringing was not necessarily the "norm." The mere fact that I believed that Santa Claus would always grant my wishes, my grandparents would always be excited to see me during summer visits and I could be anything that I wanted to be when I grew up is not necessarily consistent with the experience of others.

Nevertheless, becoming anything that I desired was what I had been taught and shown. My teachers reinforced that. My parents told my siblings and me this as we did homework and went on family outings. However once I graduated from college and became an adult, I learned that professional life for me was not so easily accessible.

Despite my sense of integrity, strong work ethic and optimism, there are times that I have been randomly judged by the mere color of my skin. This was a curve ball for which I had not been prepared. At home, I had been taught to believe that character was more important. My dad was determined to teach his children that our skin color did not define us. He emphasized that we were human beings created in the divine image of God, as Genesis informs us. Additionally, he fostered that we were Americans; within our society we had a voice and ongoing opportunities for our dreams to be made real.

Today, I find myself looking back over my life as an American as well as looking ahead to a new future for me and the nation. My life did not go exactly as I had imagined. I did not enter the political landscape, at least not yet. I am not likely to become President. Yet to recognize that my dream may come true for another, either an African American male or European American female, is unparalleled.

The good news is that our nation is also dreaming big...evolving and overcoming the prejudices of our past. No one can know the outcome of the 2008 race for President of the United States; however the reality is that one of these candidates may well become our next commander in chief. Certainly, I do not pretend to personally know the childhoods of the candidates. But, like me, I imagine they were told to "dream big...anything was possible."

Bentley de Bardelaben is an African-American minister in the United Church of Christ.

## Troubling Way to Elect a President

Perhaps our system needs some fixing

BY JUDGE GREG MATHIS

For generations the United States government has prided itself on its democratic system, so much so that it has criticized and invaded other countries, imposing an American-like system that represents all people equally.

But given past troubles with our country's elections process, perhaps the United States should review and correct its own elections systems before policing that of others.

In the 2000 presidential elections, Vice President Al Gore won the popular vote. Yet, an outdated voting process, better known as the Electoral College, awarded the presidency to George Bush and began eight years of increased public dissatisfaction with our nation's political process.

The Electoral College is com-

prised of delegates from each state.

As a candidate wins a state, those delegates are awarded to him (and her). Bigger states have more delegates. Wins in those delegate-rich



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states give a candidate the upper hand, no matter how low voter turnout in that state may have been. Though the public supported Gore, Bush got the push he needed from the delegates.

Political insiders worry our political system is set to once again ignore the will of the people. In the Republican presidential primaries, it's winner takes all... delegates that is. In the Democratic primaries, however, candidates are awarded

delegates proportionate to the popular vote in that state. That said, "super-delegates", who comprise nearly one-fifth of the parties delegate count, may cast a vote that goes against the desires of the voters they serve.

Democrats created the "super-delegate" in the 1980s, believing these individuals, all of whom are

Democrats, who claim to be the most concerned about equal representation and honoring the voice of the people, would use such a system to elect their leaders. If enough behind-the-scene promises are made, a promising candidate, one the public stands behind, could be stopped in their tracks.

The way we elect national leaders in this country is troubling. From the Electoral College to the "super-delegates," the United States has chosen a very complicated way to, in effect, silence majority. How then, is this country any different from those we criticize?

In a true democracy, the voice of the people is all that matters. Candidates win not because of their political alliances or their deep pockets, but because they touched voters. And if the people make a mistake?

So be it. We cannot do any worse than the Electoral College did in 2000.

Judge Greg Mathis is national vice president of Rainbow PUSH and a national board member of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

## Mayor Visits and Now What?

Jefferson must appeal to kids that live nearby

BY DON JOHNSON

As a former Jefferson High School student and teacher, I can offer some of my feelings and opinions about the school.

I think it was great that the outgoing mayor, members of the city council and other city officials conducted its business from Jefferson during a weeklong stay. But I wonder how this really helps the high school and more importantly its current and future students?

What information could school district administrators learn that they didn't already know? From my point of view, very little.

From 2000-2007, there have been eight principals at Jefferson. During their respective tenures, these administrators have adopted and implemented numerous educational models, moving from a four-block program to small schools, back to a traditional school model and now its current school academies.

All of these changes were aimed at improving the quality of education and improving student scores and literacy. Have they been successful? Have any of these plans or designs worked? According to all of the data and information the district has shared with the community, I don't think so. So what has been the problem(s)?

How does a school with one-quarter of its student body on IEPs (Individual Educational Programs) or who have been identified as students with special needs, meet district and state benchmarks when its leadership and educational infrastructure has been in a constant state of chaos?

Ponder this, how does a school that every year loses at least one-half of the students from its feeder schools to other high schools via the district's transfer policy, be expected to show more than mar-

schools.

How do we begin to correct this problem? I agree it does begin with a strong and caring administrative leadership team. But more importantly Jefferson must begin by overhauling its current curriculum and class offerings to make the school more appealing to the students within its community.

Also find it quite interesting that a school that has a strong majority African-American student body doesn't offer elective classes in African-American literature and

*If the mayor, city council and JHS administrative team walked the halls and visited classes with their 'eyes wide open' then how can they not agree that something is missing?*

ginal academic gains when the lost students are the best and brightest? If we closely examine data pertaining to student achievement and academic success we discover that most of these ex-Jefferson students are doing quite well at their new

history. If I were an African-American parent, I would definitely question this oversight. Speaking of parents, they too must realize that they are the most important and influential stakeholders in the education of their children.

Learning begins at home and must be reinforced on a daily basis. School should not be viewed as a glorified baby-sitting and daycare service or as an athletic factory. Parents should also stop enabling their children by accepting and oftentimes condoning inappropriate and anti-social behaviors.

Teachers rely on parents to make sure that their children arrive to school on time with the necessary books and materials for their classes. Over the years I have observed students who have become confrontational and verbally abusive toward teachers when questioned about their unpreparedness.

Quite often students who repeatedly challenge authority and disrupt the learning environment force teachers to devote more time addressing and correcting these behaviors than teaching those students who came to school to learn.

Veteran or experienced teachers in most cases are capable of handling these situations without escalating inappropriate behaviors from students. Unfortunately during my stay at "Jeff" the staff turnover on a yearly basis was so great that we found ourselves with too many new or inexperienced teachers.

When I say inexperienced, I mean

teachers who had little or limited contact and interaction with children of color and children lacking the "social skill set" that we expect from high-school students. If unchecked this situation can cultivate a "status quo attitude" where teachers accept these questionable behaviors as being the norm for a specific group or race of people instead of working to eradicate these inappropriate behaviors.

One helpful and positive way to accomplish this would be through expanding the curriculum to include classes in "Effective Communication Skills, Human Interactions, Sociology, and Psychology." Instead of assuming or relying solely on others to provide the cure parents, teachers, and administrators must work together in developing a "holistic educational paradigm" that's preventive and therapeutic.

Next and some may take exception to this particular suggestion; the current teaching staff at JHS needs to be re-evaluated. This should begin with an introspective self-evaluation by those teachers who don't want to be at Jefferson. If unhappy, then they should explore other career options rather than continue to perpetuate mediocrity and complacency.

For those who elect to stay in spite of their apparent lack of commitment to excellence, the Jefferson administration, its community members and union leaders must work together to convince the school district to implement these changes. These are tough decisions but we have to begin somewhere.

The playing field has been uneven for eight years, and now its time to do something about it. If this means that some feelings are hurt, then so be it, because far too many young African-American students as well as other students are not receiving a quality education at Jefferson High School.

It was great that the mayor, his staff, and others spent a week at Jefferson. But what did they truly accomplish? Were more hollow or empty promises made or were new guarantees made that may go unfulfilled?

If the mayor, city council and JHS administrative team walked the halls and visited classes with their "eyes wide open," then how can they not agree that something is missing?

I pose this question to everyone who is familiar with the current situation at "Jeff" under its current design: Would you allow your child to attend this school for four years?

Don Johnson is a retired African-American educator and the chief executive officer for Kids N' Tennis, Inc., a youth tennis program.

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